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PRESS RELEASE

Over 80 presentations by leading authorities on indoor air quality from Europe, Asia and North Africa were given during a three-day conference held at Imperial College, London, according to conference organizer Professor Roger Perry of the college's Department of Civil Engineering. The International Conference on Indoor and Ambient Air Quality, which concluded today, addressed the issues of indoor air quality monitoring and control, possible health effects, ventilation, and architectural design.

The conference was held to provide a forum for the scientific exchange of information on indoor air quality. Problems of indoor air quality have become more common as individuals spend more time indoors at work and at home. And because public policy decisions regarding indoor air quality must ultimately depend upon objective scientific data, it is essential to have a better understanding of the constituents of indoor air and their possible effects on health.

Several presenters addressed the issue of exposure to environmental tobacco smoke (ETS). Recently, indoor air quality problems often have been attributed to the presence of tobacco smoke in the air. However, data presented by a number of scientists suggested that this may be an oversimplified approach to the problem. Studies which have monitored carbon monoxide, nicotine

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and particulates (common indicators of ETS) report low concentrations of ETS in the air of public places and commercial aircraft. One authority on indoor air quality problems noted that hanging tobacco smoke is more often a symptom than a cause of poor air quality. Visible tobacco smoke is a sign that a building's ventilation system is not functioning properly. A ban on smoking, which can be an annoyance to some individuals, apparently does not solve such problems.

The lack of fresh air or the recirculation of stale air may lead to air quality problems which, unlike tobacco smoke, cannot be seen. Such conditions often provide breeding grounds for bacteria and fungi which, in turn, may cause upper respiratory complaints, headaches, sore eyes, or even serious illness.

There are a number of indoor air constituents which may have an influence on human health, but there is no single acceptable method for evaluating human exposures to such constituents. This generates a paradox: Data on actual human exposures are needed before potential health effects can be assessed, but a satisfactory method to measure such exposures has not been developed.

For this reason, several scientists at the conference reassessed the health claims which have been made about ETS. They pointed out that the epidemiological studies on which such claims

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are based have relied upon inaccurate and unreliable exposure indices and have generally ignored exposures to other common indoor air byproducts from such sources as cooking and heating. Other important variables which also need to be examined are the diet and living conditions of the individuals studied.

Proceedings of this conference are available, and selected papers have been published in Environmental Technology Letters.

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